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0521847877 - The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760

John Robertson

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THE CASE FOR THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The Case for the Enlightenment is an important and ambitious comparative study of the emergence of Enlightenment in Scotland and in Naples. Challenging the recent tendency to fragment the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Europe into multiple Enlightenments, John Robertson demonstrates the extent to which thinkers in two societies at the opposite ends of Europe shared common intellectual preoccupations. Before 1700, Scotland and Naples faced a bleak future as backward, provincial kingdoms in a Europe of aggressive commercial states. Yet by 1760, Scottish and Neapolitan thinkers, led by David Hume and Antonio Genovesi, were in the van of those advocating the cause of Enlightenment by means of political economy. By study of the social and institutional contexts of intellectual life in the two countries, and the currents of thought promoted within them, *The Case for the Enlightenment* explains this transformation. At its centre is an examination of Giambattista Vico's *New Science* and David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and *Natural History of Religion* as works informed by a similar, Epicurean moral philosophy, and as responses to the notorious argument of Pierre Bayle that a society of atheists was as plausible as a society of idolaters. Unexpected contemporaries, Vico and Hume illuminate the common intellectual foundations of Enlightenment in the two countries, in which Epicurean philosophy was the midwife of political economy.

JOHN ROBERTSON is University Lecturer in Modern History and a Fellow of St Hugh's College, Oxford.

Cambridge University Press

0521847877 - The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760

John Robertson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

IDEAS IN CONTEXT 73

The Case for the Enlightenment

Cambridge University Press

0521847877 - The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760

John Robertson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

IDEAS IN CONTEXT

Edited by Quentin Skinner and James Tully

The books in this series will discuss the emergence of intellectual traditions and of related new disciplines. The procedures, aims and vocabularies that were generated will be set in the context of the alternatives available within the contemporary frameworks of ideas and institutions. Through detailed studies of the evolution of such traditions, and their modification by different audiences, it is hoped that a new picture will form of the development of ideas in their concrete contexts. By this means, artificial distinctions between the history of philosophy, of the various sciences, of society and politics, and of literature may be seen to dissolve.

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[More information](#)

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
1 The case for the Enlightenment	I
2 Scotland and Naples in 1700	52
3 The intellectual worlds of Naples and Scotland 1680–c.1725	94
4 The predicament of ‘kingdoms governed as provinces’	147
5 Vico, after Bayle	201
6 Hume, after Bayle and Mandeville	256
7 The advent of Enlightenment: political economy in Naples and Scotland 1730–1760	325
Conclusion: the Enlightenment vindicated?	377
<i>Bibliography</i>	406
<i>Index</i>	439

Cambridge University Press

0521847877 - The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760

John Robertson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

The idea of this book had two origins: a remark by Arnaldo Momigliano that Edinburgh and Naples were good places from which to observe the legacy of feudalism in the eighteenth century, and a journey in 1978 through southern Italy in the company of my wife Maxine, my late brother Mark, and Norman Douglas's *Old Calabria*.¹ The latter's tales of flying monks and the pleasures of 'reposing at Castrovillari' were happily confirmed by observation and experience; but gradually I also appreciated the deeper affinity which Douglas felt as a Scot for the Italian south. Waiting the obligatory hours for the bus connection between the railway station for Matera and the city, itself still many miles distant, I was struck by a resemblance between the landscapes of Basilicata and the Scottish Highlands. In colour and natural aspect, of course, they could hardly be more different: by late September the hills of Basilicata are bleached white, turning lunar in appearance. Yet there was a historical, human reality in common: this too was a land once occupied by many more inhabitants, who had laboured for their lords until modern commercial agriculture had made the way of life redundant. In the event, neither feudalism nor the Highlands were to play more than a very small part in the book, and the truth of Momigliano's remark (to which I return only in the conclusion) remains to be properly investigated. Instead I became fascinated by why and how the Enlightenment should have come to two such distant and unpromising countries in the first place. The original intuition of a comparable social experience is still present in what follows, in the importance attached to political economy as a common interest of both the Scots and the Neapolitans. But the stimulus of others' scholarship has helped to enlarge the ambition of my enquiry, leading me to investigate the cultural resources and intellectual inspirations available to the two sets of philosophers, and particularly to attempt to understand the achievements of the most original of these, Giambattista Vico and David Hume.

¹ Norman Douglas, *Old Calabria* (1915; Harmondsworth, 1962).

Cambridge University Press

0521847877 - The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760

John Robertson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Preface

The idea of the book has in turn been given focus by its argument, which is with the now widespread conviction that it is impossible, or redundant, to think and write of 'the' Enlightenment as one coherent intellectual movement. No one has made this claim more cogently than John Pocock, and the title of this book is deliberately chosen to maintain a unitary conception of Enlightenment, in contradistinction to Pocock's preference for plural 'Enlightenments'. To argue with John Pocock, however, is more instructive than any agreement; this book is indebted alike to the inspiration of his scholarship and to the personal courtesy with which he has responded to my attempted challenge.

In preparing and writing a book so long in the gestation, I have inevitably acquired many other debts, institutional and personal. First among the former are my debts to St Hugh's College and to the Modern History Faculty at Oxford, which together have granted me the periods of sabbatical and other leave essential to research and writing. Within these are individuals whose willingness to shoulder extra burdens has been the necessary corollary of my freedom: the late Colin Matthew, George Garnett, and Senia Paseta at St Hugh's, and in the Faculty, Joanna Innes and Laurence Brockliss. The Bodleian, the National Library, and the National Archives of Scotland are wonderful places in which to work; once again I am grateful to their staff for their assistance, expertise, and courtesy. I also acknowledge with gratitude the award of a Senior Research Fellowship by the British Academy in 1996–97, and of four months of research leave by the Arts and Humanities Research Board in 2003. The former provided the opportunity to embed myself in the scholarship already devoted to Naples in the period, as well as to work in the city's libraries and archives; the latter enabled me to complete the writing of the principal chapters.

Those with whom I have discussed the project are legion, and to all I owe thanks. Special mention should be made of those who have studied 'The Science of Society 1650–1800' with me at Oxford since 1990, since it was with them that I gradually learned to understand Vico in the company of his contemporaries. Audiences at seminars and conferences in Oxford, Edinburgh, Naples, Dublin, London, Reading, Leicester, Venice, Budapest, Tel Aviv, Chicago, and Vancouver have given me the opportunity to try out my arguments, and to test the strength of their foundations. Over the years, certain individuals have formed a core group of fellow scholars of the Scottish Enlightenment, with whom I have discussed issues general and particular: in alphabetical order, Roger Emerson, Istvan Hont, Colin Kidd, Ned Landsman, Jim Moore, David Norton, Fania Oz-Salzberger, Nicholas Phillipson, Isabel Rivers, Richard Sher, Silvia Sebastiani, Sandy Stewart,

Cambridge University Press

0521847877 - The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760

John Robertson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xi

and Paul Wood. I am particularly grateful to those who have also read and commented on draft chapters: Dena Goodman, Steve Pincus, Istvan Hont, and Jim Moore. The last two have been the kind of readers whose different, conflicting, occasionally mischievous suggestions have made it imperative to think again. The chapter on Vico was also read to Hugh Trevor-Roper, whose aversion to theology was no barrier to intelligent listening and helpful criticism. My debt to him is the oldest of all; the clarity of his intelligence and warmth of his encouragement never dimmed. Once it had been submitted, the book was read again for the Press; to both of its readers I am indebted for comments shrewd, constructive, and encouraging.

The opportunity to work in Naples has added another dimension to the pleasure of preparing this book. I am indebted first of all to those who have made my visits possible by their hospitality and friendship – and by their very practical help in finding me accommodation. Barbara Dawes and her husband Franco Clemente have fulfilled all these roles from the beginning; they have since been joined by Mark Weir, Nick Robinson, and Roberta Invernizzi. For the past ten years Lidia and Giovanni Porrini have been the kindest of hosts in Viale Fornelli. My gratitude to Enrico and Cinzia Nuzzo is of another order. When I began research in Naples in 1987 I travelled down to Salerno to consult Enrico Nuzzo as a Vico scholar; I have returned ever since, for the pleasure of a friendship which has enriched my life immeasurably.

Neapolitan historians have been as welcoming personally as they have been helpful intellectually. John Davis was one of the first to encourage my interest, and provided many introductions. Ever hospitable, Anna Maria Rao has been a generous source of suggestions and references; with Girolamo Imbruglia, to whom I have similar debts, she exemplifies a commitment to studying Neapolitan history in a cosmopolitan perspective. Among the older generation, whose scholarship provided the foundation of so much of this book, I have cause to be grateful to Giuseppe Galasso, to Raffaele Ajello (generous with suggestions when I began); and, at a distance, to Giuseppe Giarrizzo. In Naples I have also incurred many institutional debts: to the Istituto per gli Studi Filosofici (and to its secretary Antonio Gargano); to the older Istituto per gli Studi Storici and its staff, and to the librarians and archivists of the Biblioteca Nazionale, the Società Napoletana per la Storia Patria, the Biblioteca dei Girolamini, and the Archivio di Stato. From the other great capital of Italian Enlightenment scholarship, Turin, I have received encouragement from Giuseppe Ricuperati, Vincenzo Ferrone, Maria Luisa Pesante, and Patrizia Delpiano. Torinese by scholarly association, Robert Oresko is also justly mentioned in this context, even if

Cambridge University Press

0521847877 - The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760

John Robertson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

Preface

he is of a different mind on the Enlightenment. Behind all these was Franco Venturi, whose intellectual inspiration was enhanced by personal kindness, in Oxford and at Vico Equense, when this project was in its infancy.

At the Press, the editors of the series, headed by Quentin Skinner, have been loyally encouraging; Richard Fisher, to me as to so many others in the field of intellectual history, has been the most supportive of publishers.

It is right as well as conventional to end these acknowledgements with my family. My mother was a constant supporter and reader of my work, and it is my greatest regret that she could not live to see the book. But I hope that my father will, and will accept the thanks that I owe to both of them. I owe most of all to Maxine Berg and our daughters, Frances, Gabriel, and Jessie. Maxine has lived with the idea and eventually the slowly growing reality of this book since our journey south of Naples in 1978, which is to say for almost all of our marriage. Even as she was writing her own books, she has constantly made more time for mine; and she has read the entire book. For this, and for much happiness throughout these years, I am profoundly grateful.